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Response Paper, “Death of a Salesman”

I argue that during the late 1940’s the emphasis on the achievement of the American Dream as the determining factor of success creates “false dreams” which creates a source of unhappiness and demise for those who cannot obtain the modernized standards of success. In “Death of a Salesman” by Arthur Miller, William “Willy” Loman is just what his surname would suggest, a low man. Willy has nothing special or unique so contribute to society expect for his personality; A characteristic which he believed triumphed over monetary returns in the business world. Lowman is below average in more ways than not, yet his desire to obtain the ultimate goal of the American Dream drives him to the point of madness.

Some people can picture success, see it, have it almost within reach only to be set back time and time again. This is the way Loman’s life has been in his pursuit of his American dream. Loman’s vision of the American Dream was a safe, sturdy home free from debt, appliances that didn’t break down before they were on their last leg, and the most intangible aspect to be the leader of the house and person his wife and kids looked up to. The mid 20th century was a time where consumerism and had it’s hold on American society. Being a homeowner is a big part of the American dream, representing that with hard work and perseverance anything can be obtained. Willy and his wife Linda had a mortgage on their home and nearly 25 years later they were almost finished with the payments. However the pressure of bringing in an income and the loss of Willy’s job brought a shattering moment where the 200 dollars needed to pay the monthly bills as well as the last mortgage payment seemed so far out of reach.

The need for material items also contributed to the idea of obtaining the American Dream. Loman often says to his wife how is wishes they would have bought the “well-advertised machine” implying that with the better ad would come a better product (53). He also makes references to his Chevrolet being the “the greatest car ever built” (21) and the quality of a general electric refrigerator being superior to the lesser brand fridge he had. The most important factor that would attribute to determining his success was the respect and admiration from his family. His wife loved and adored him, despite him having an affair and his lack of income and fading ability to keep his mind together. However his two sons, especially Willy’s older son Biff did not respect his father, which caused much upset, and discord in the family.

The combining factors for the desire to have the material and emotional togetherness that was the American dream seems attainable but when Loman’s expectations were not met, i.e. inability to pay the mortgage, appliances continually breaking down, and lack of respect from his children, he increasingly became unhappy and jealous of his neighbors who seemed to have all the right answers and was able to attain the American Dream. Lowman’s inability to provide for his family sprouted from his desire to have it all and to put personality above actual output. Unable to fulfill the expectations society had set forth, Lowman determines that the possibility of obtaining the American Dream is over for him, but through his death his children can use his life insurance money to get a head start and make something out of their lives.